

Connecting the Dots: Wildfire, Forest Health, and Sustainable Rural Economies

**Notes from the Webposium Grass Valley Regional Discussion
October 29th, 2009**

Hosted by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy

GRASS VALLEY

Attendees: List not available.

1. From the morning panel discussions, what resonated for you?

The panel was very diverse. There was surprise at how much the panels agreed on. During the last panel one of the speakers recommended starting in a room to figure out the collective vision rather than starting on the ground. Most of the big picture goals we agree on, its the details that are the problem and those don't show up until implementation begins.

2. What is your vision of success?

- Sustainability
- Fuels reduction to reduce risk of wildfire
- Economic stimulation
- Energy independence

3. What is our “starting point for action”?

Nevada County and surrounding areas have already created the North Sierra Biomass Task Force. It includes Nevada and Sierra County. Placer County was involved but is now working on its own project. It includes County Supervisors, environmental leaders, agency people (USFS), private foresters, Sierra Business Council, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, the fire safe council, and the Nevada County Economic Resource Council. Goals include sustainability, economy, and ecology and fuel reduction.

4. What are the barriers or hurdles to overcome?

- Siting of facilities - Nevada County received grant money from BLM to site a biomass sorting facility. It was crushed by the locals because no one wanted it in their back yard. The County had to turn back \$250,000 because of objections over truck traffic and noise. They were given the funding again and land next to the landfill but it was still turned down for the same reasons.
- Market prices - There have been four timber sales in the Tahoe National Forest that haven't had a single bidder; there is no market right now. In the Yuba fire there was a landowner that had 700 acres of salvage wood. It will cost him \$30,000 to remove those dead trees. Markets are dynamic. Even if the market is here today it might not be here tomorrow. We need to figure out how to sustain the ups and downs. Government subsidies for these types of projects when the market is down are appropriate.
- Funding - How to fund and implement projects is still an issue. Big trees cut used to subsidize the cost of fuels reduction. Cutting only trees under 10" diameter is not financially viable. We need to look at capturing the externalities and applying those towards subsidies for biomass energy. Move the money around. Another option is to have the end users pay more. For example, there are lots of people who use the water that comes from the Sierra outside of the Sierra. We could work to get a surcharge on end users to be able to support projects like restoration, conservation, fuel reduction, etc.
- Scale - We are making small fuel breaks with National Fire Plan money. We need to look at returning to a landscape scale effort that is able to handle fire. Someone needs to champion this Sierra-wide and look for a solution by working with the existing agencies.

- Sustainability concerns - There are concerns about the sustainability of biomass removal activities over time. Concerns expressed included depletion soil organic matter and compaction.

Soil organic matter concerns - Does taking so much organic matter out of the forest create soil issues? There is debate on whether nitrogen loss through combustion or biomass removal is higher, but loss due to catastrophic fire is more. If you wait until needle loss happens before you remove the fuel load there is still organic matter that remains to keep the soil. Some UC studies are addressing this issue. The Nature Conservancy is looking at reintroducing fire into the landscape on their properties but they have to get the fuel load down first. If you reintroduce fire what are the carbon issues associated?

Soil compaction concerns - What about the machinery being used? Does it compact the soil? Or does the nature of the soil type in the forest allow it to get compacted in the summer and fluffed back up due to winter moisture

5. What level of planning needs to go into these goal/activities?

- Land use planning is a big issue for facility siting and State law directs that. Any legislation will need to involve land use planning. Placer County will be developed out to the Sutter County line before long. Currently any project that satisfies transportation and waste management requirements will be approved.
- Timber harvest regulation - We need to look at not just reducing regulation but changing it by reducing the amount of paperwork and the cost. Regulation was put in place for good reason. Placer County used the general plan update to create a programmatic timber EIR for a program timber harvest plan in Meadow Vista. It is in place but has never been used in Placer County. CalFire has the same thing in process. We need to figure out a programmatic plan to cover activities to speed up implementation. To do this we need to start the visioning process with all of the stakeholders. Look at the structure used for Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP's). Lorna Dobrovolny from Cal Fish and Game has some good ideas on how to do this.

6. What projects are going on currently or in the past?

- Loyalton - Another plant could be opened there because the facility is already in place.
- Hobart Mills - There's a site by Hobart Mills with potential for a cogeneration or pellet plant. But if Loyalton can't keep the mill open how can Hobart Mills even get started? When most of the facilities in the Sierra were started they were subsidized by the energy users, now they are not.

In another interesting approach, Foresthill High School has the mill and the timber nearby but they don't have a shop. Colfax High School has a shop. One of the instructors has been trying to work out a partnership where the Foresthill students measure the timber and then it's sent to Colfax where they convert it to bird boxes. There have been hang-ups with the school rules and regulations.

What are the reasons for success or failure of a biomass facility nearby?

- Energy prices - Existing contract prices are too low. The Loyalton plant is closing because they can't agree on the price for energy.

- Competition - There is competition with other renewable energy sources.
- Scale - Smaller, more localized plants might be better than the large scale model if technologies could be adapted. A big plant means lots of transportation of materials to keep it running. If you have a smaller scale operation and more of them then you have less transportation needs. A smaller plant produces less energy though. We need to foster research for technology. How many acres need to be treated to run a small plant?
- Air quality - Placer County is having issues siting their plant because of air pollution in the Tahoe basin. This issue comes from transportation of materials mostly.

What is the potential for establishment of a new local biomass or wood products facility?

- Increasing demand - The demand for pellets and bricks are going up, especially in Europe. There is a German pellet company working with the Forest Service (Bear Mountain Forest Products, Oregon) to look at making pellets and shipping them to Europe from Sacramento. They may open a plant in Sonoma too. Most pellet plants in Oregon use sawmill waste. Enigma is another shipping company in the Bay Area.
- Focus on preserving remaining infrastructure - We can't lose what's left of the sawmill infrastructure. They are already sited and can be used for other focuses. Cogeneration and pellet plants are most efficient when they are associated with existing sawmills. One of the issues is the expense of the equipment. Smaller scale companies can't compete with big ones like SPI because of the expense of the equipment and experienced loggers.
- Stewardship contracts - Stewardship contracts would help because they provide a suite of services over time. USFS pays a company to log, thin, and remove slash. The contract guarantees a certain amount of cutting on a large acreage of land over a longer period of time. A German company needs to have a 10 year contract to consider it viable. The problem is that USFS funding comes annually and that makes it hard to guarantee a 10 year contract.
- Potential for mobile plants - What about mobile biomass plants? If you center a plant somewhere and bring materials from a 35 mile radius it seems like thinning could move along quickly. Two issues are barriers to this, economics and transmission. A plant that small wouldn't make enough energy to be feasible and hooking up to the grid for energy transmission is difficult.

7. Who here today can contribute to developing local collaboration?

8. Who is missing from today's discussion?

9. What are the next steps?

- Get more information - We should better understand the Placer Biomass Project and use their lessons learned (numbers, siting issues, etc.). The locations where projects have been done have been mapped but no one knows about them. Why?
- Programmatic EIR - There are still issues with expanding this county-wide because of County control and economic issues.
- Encourage CWPPs - They are similar to the programmatic timber EIR but they include the community and all stakeholders during creation.
- Education - Help people that move into the forest to understand these issues. As the population increases we need to increase education.

- Improve political representation - There's also an issue with political configuration. The Sierra doesn't have any gravity, representation as one voice. How can we prevent vast use of Sierra resources by non-Sierra areas without this? If you expand the CABY idea down to the Bay Delta there might be some political capital.

Are there resources that this community needs that the SNC or partners can provide?

- Facilitate a next steps discussion. Serve as a framework/ facilitator for the visioning meetings. Keep pushing forward with these.
- Continue to educate stakeholders on all perspectives.
- Educate the legislature and their staff on the issues and solutions. Especially focus on downstream users and large population areas outside the Sierra. Connect these people to the forests because they don't see the Sierra Nevada region as being "their" forest. Remember that Sacramento reacts to problems. National elected officials are getting it.
- Externalities - Start a process to explain the externalities to the public and begin the conversation on downstream user surtaxes.
- Work with locals - Get the County BOS to be more engaged. Also the Chambers of Commerce.
- Work with state agencies - Pull together state agencies including CalFire, CDF&G, SWRCB, USFS and act in a clearinghouse-type role. Look at land management through State agency collaboration. Bring in these groups to look at the Sierra region as a whole. Add State and local agency leaders to the Annual Federal Land Managers meeting- team with FS and BLM.
- Help facilitate the NIMBY issue - Work with locals on zoning, etc. Get local folks to the table (Chamber of Commerce, Board of Supervisors, etc.) to help make sure the Board of Supervisors and Chambers of Commerce understand the connection between healthy forests and healthy communities.
- Funding - Make more connections between known projects and appropriate funding. Use a more targeted approach by knowing projects that are out there. Don't mimic the CA Fire Safe Council's grant programs.
- Research - Serve as nexus between research and community programs (try to access Energy Commission funds)